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Pentagon Says New Security Measures to Deter Espionage, but Critics See Watchdogs as Target

By Tim Carrington
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—The Pentagon is thickening the fortress around its house secrets.

In the past several months, the Defense Department has issued a battery of new secrecy protections for previously unclassified information and has greatly increased its use of polygraph tests for employees. Meanwhile, top department officials have taken to publicly lashing out at those they consider too loose-tongued.

Why the flurry of activity? Gen. Richard Stilwell, deputy undersecretary for policy, says there's been "an increase in the hostile intelligence presence" in the U.S., a presence his boss, Fred Ikle, characterizes as "the proverbial Bulgarian with the big briefcase."

However, critics contend that the new rules and procedures are aimed, at least in part, at a different menace: the loose confederacy of self-appointed watchdogs inside and outside the Pentagon who have worked to publicize unflattering reports of procurement scandals and defective weapons. "The embarrassments they've suffered are part of the impetus," concedes one Pentagon official.

And on Capitol Hill, too, there is concern that "the proverbial Bulgarian" might not be the only target. "This could not only stop the flow of information to the Soviet Union, it could stop the flow of information to the Congress and the public," says an aide to Rep. Denny Smith (R., Ore.).

Last year, in response to pleas from the Pentagon, Congress empowered the Defense Department to impose tougher rules protecting sensitive technologies under the Arms Export Control Act. However, now there's growing worry that the department went too far when it actually issued the rules.

Clark Mollenhoff, a journalism professor at Washington & Lee University and a veteran defense reporter, says the new rules "are a step in the direction of the British Official Secrets Act, in which anything the government doesn't want to make public is an official secret."

Of course, one reason for the outcry over the Pentagon controls is that journalists and legislators often have enhanced their careers by exposing big-dollar defense procurement scandals.

However, those who cover and oversee the Defense Department say that secrets are generally guarded selectively: those that are embarrassing to the military are tightly controlled, while sensitive information that might bolster support for defense programs is shared, often by high-ranking Pentagon officials. For instance, early in the Reagan administration, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger arranged for intelligence officials to brief reporters on classified secrets involving the Soviet military.

Possible Challenge

The new Pentagon secrecy rules create a series of restrictive labels from "A" to "X," apart from the existing classifications such as "confidential," "secret" and "top secret." The Pentagon also adopted a broader definition of "technological data" than Congress had set forth, thereby expanding the reach of the new rules. Critics argue that the new categories are unnecessary because nearly all information whose release would jeopardize national security was already classified.

"This relates to information the department concedes that it can't classify" under the existing system, says Allan Adler, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU is reviewing the new regulations and may decide to challenge them. If the rules survive, "they will definitely have a chilling effect," says Mr. Adler.

Here's an example of how the new rules could restrict information that previously found its way outside the Pentagon:

Two years ago, an unclassified memorandum from the Defense Science Board emerged full of criticism of the "Lantirn" radar system being developed for attack planes. The memo stated that the system had performed badly in tests and that a fundamental assumption underlying its design was "a fantasy."

Predictably, the release of the memo caused a flap. The Lantirn is still under development, however, and it's more likely that its shortcomings will be corrected than if the disparaging memo had been kept under wraps.

Under the new rules, such a report on the Lantirn would be labeled "B" because it contained test and evaluation data, and officials would be prohibited from sharing it with anyone outside the Pentagon or other government agencies that the Pentagon ruled had a right to see it.

Pentagon officials are sensitive to charges that they are more concerned about embarrassing leaks than about foreign espionage. In describing the latest polygraph testing program, the department stated: "The sole purpose is to deter and detect espionage in the most sensitive national security programs. Changes in policy are not directed at leaks." But during questioning about the polygraph testing, Gen. Stilwell conceded that one planned question would disclose whether employees had ever given classified materials to unauthorized persons, a category that would include reporters.

Disclosures Criticized

Meanwhile, Pentagon leaders are unabashed in their attacks on leakers. Mr. Ikle at a recent after-dinner talk, tore up a previously prepared speech and launched a verbal assault on "hard-core leaks and soft-core leaks." He said he and others at the Pentagon are seeking "moral support" from Congress in their efforts to crack down on unwanted disclosures.

Also, Secretary Weinberger recently lashed out at the Washington Post for publishing a story about a spy satellite scheduled to be launched over the Soviet Union. The Post, which ran the article in the face of a request from the Air Force to hold it, said that the satellite mission wasn't particularly unusual and that nearly all the information in the story had been aired publicly during a congressional hearing.

Richard Smyser, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, thinks the Pentagon invokes national security concerns too often for its own good. "I don't think there's anything worse for the protection of real secrets than crying wolf," he says.